

## Gulf of Mexico Program

The Gulf's diverse beauty and quality of life draw both residents and tourists, who enjoy the many recreational activities — beaches, golf courses, parks, camping facilities, water sports and ecotourism — afforded by this vast body of water. Additionally, 31 states — 65 percent of the 48 contiguous states — have rivers and streams that drain into the Mississippi River and then into the Gulf of Mexico. Census Bureau population estimates show a 14.5 percent increase in the population of the five Gulf Coast states between 1990 and 1999, from a total of 40.8 million in 1990, to an estimated 46.7 million in 1999.

The Gulf of Mexico Program is a unique non-regulatory partnership working with interests across the Gulf to link environmental protection with sound economic development of the Gulf Coast states. Issues for the new century being addressed by the program include:

- **Public Health:** Gulf coastal counties are experiencing the second fastest growth rate in the United States, but basic services such as wastewater treatment are not being satisfied in many areas.
- **Habitat:** Important habitats continue to be destroyed. Ninety-five percent of the Gulf's important recreational and commercially valuable species depend on these vital habitat areas.
- **Nonindigenous Species:** A significant pathway for the introduction of nonindigenous species, such as the zebra mussel, is through the release of ship ballast water.
- **Nutrients:** The Gulf is experiencing an increase in the number and distribution of harmful alga blooms that affect fisheries, public health and tourism.

